

# A pure voice in a diluted world

THU JUN 28 1990



**Brenda**

**Payton**

Good morning, it's "two days until Nelson Mandela comes to Oakland" day.

Since Oakland was confirmed as a stop on the Mandela's U.S. tour, I've been like a kid waiting for Christmas, checking every day to see how many days are left until Mandela Day.

I'm not the only one. The area is electrified with the anticipation of The Visit.

First the Gorbachevs and now the Mandelas. The Bay Area is feeling like a regular stage for the Great Leaders of Change. Too bad we have to

import the idea of leadership. But then maybe some of it will wear off.

I'm particularly proud that Oakland was the Bay Area city chosen for the Mandela visit. Given our population and the city's anti-apartheid activism, it's a fitting choice.

Our city ordinance became the national model. The Eastbay is the home of Congressman Ron Dellums, who introduced the federal sanctions bill. There are so many people here who have worked so long for the destruction of apartheid, it will feel like a reunion when the Mandelas arrive.

Back in the '70s, when the movement was struggling to focus attention on the crime of apartheid, who would have imagined that one day they would see Mandela, not only free, but in Oakland? This is one of those rare occasions when dedication, hard work and determination are actually rewarded. Bask in it, bask in it, bask in it.

I've been interested to see how the Mandela trip has demystified the legend. The media is doing its usual job of overkill and overdo, an exercise that misses the point of whatever is suddenly in everyone's headlines.

But somehow Mandela resists the trivialization, bypassing the media gamesmanship of a Ted Koppel, inspiring reporters to forget their objectivity and applaud his arrival at the White House, moving congressional representatives of both parties to an almost-continuous standing ovation.

Incredibly, the more we see of Mandela, before the United Nations or the joint session of Congress, the more the real man overshadows the legend. And that's saying something, given the enormity of the legend. No matter what lionized, idealized image you had of him, if you had never seen the man speak you could not imagine his power.

And it's not necessarily that he is such a talented speaker in terms of oratorical skills. I've listened to most of his speeches on this trip and he generally has a

flat, unemotional delivery that sounds as if he's reading. If you compare him, for example, to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a master of oratory emotion, you'll see what I mean.

The power of Mandela and his speeches does not come from style, but from substance and background. It is what he is saying and the fact that he is saying it that gives his delivery the punch.

His message is simple and consistent. It has been the same for 40 years, with some very minor adjustments about the post-apartheid economy. For his entire political life he has talked about one thing — the destruction of apartheid.

It is that focus and moral authority that gives Mandela the stature that is larger even than the myth. For 40 years he has dedicated himself to abolishing apartheid and he spent 27 of those years in prison, thinking he would spend the rest of his life there, because of his opposition.

There are a few people who can claim that kind of dedication, but very few. It's a waste of time for negotiators or interviewers to try to play a game of political compromise with him, or any game at all. A man who gave 27 years of his freedom and his entire life to fighting an injustice is hardly a man of relative values.

The absoluteness of his vision is nostalgic, recalling the purity of our own country's civil rights movement. In fact there are interesting parallels between the history of race relations in the two countries, even though blacks and whites are in opposite numerical circumstances. I think black Americans have always felt that the liberation of black South Africans was the unfinished business that would make our own fight for civil rights complete.

Now our struggle is diffuse and complex. Our leaders are politicians with a compromised, negotiated vision. It may be the natural evolution of change, the process of normalizing race relations. But a leader with a singular dedication is refreshing and invigorating.

There is no comparison to our nation's leaders. We are living in a time of managed reality and relative truth, when an economy-undermining deficit is managed by lip syncing, when the flag symbolizing the country is more treasured than its children. The concept of a leader with a vision is relegated to history.

Mandela reminds us that it doesn't have to be that way, that you can fight for something, that you can believe in something. I think that's what makes him such an imposing and inspirational presence. In a world of relativity he is an absolute.

And he's going to be in Oakland!

I told you I'm excited. And I won't even apologize for gushing. Please expect more gushing to follow.

Now it's less than two days until "Nelson Mandela comes to Oakland" day.

*Brenda Payton writes on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays.*

# Mandela brings power to an Oakland afternoon

*sent to my area*

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All of the sudden he was there. Walking slowly down the stairs from the airplane, his wife Winnie by his side, a genuine smile spreading across the face that for 27 years had not been seen or photographed. Nelson Mandela stepped onto the ground in Oakland and it seemed like he was coming home.

The well-wishers who had waited giddily for his arrival cheered, but the response was somewhat reserved, as if the actual presence of the man had subdued them. Nelson Mandela, his gray hair thick, his

lean frame erect, standing before us in the bright sun of a clear Oakland day. An electric emotion surged through the crowd.

"I don't think I've ever been to an event of this magni-

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**Brenda  
Payton**

for tents yesterday to house the thousands of people left  
THERAN, Iran — Authorities issued an urgent appeal

# to break the spell

Iran asks for tents, prefabricated housing  
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tude," a Bay Area elected official had commented as we rode the bus to the airport. We were part of a community delegation welcoming the Mandelas.

A little girl with her hair freshly braided in an intricate pattern cradled a huge bouquet of roses and lilies. "These are for Mr. Mandela. Or Mrs. Mandela, Yes, Mrs. Mandela I think."

A group of South African exiles began singing freedom songs and the accompanying stomp rocked the bus. The emotion was building.

"The feeling is beyond description," said Bonai Busika as we waited at the airport. Busika, a political exile, has not been to South Africa since he left in 1975. "I feel so elated. I feel renewed, reborn. A few years ago, I thought the man would never see here. But we never lost hope."

Four-year-old Themba, which means hope in Zulu, and 5-year-old Vuyo, which means happiness in Xhosa, played Zorro with the sticks of their African National Congress flags.

"We are coming to see this

one," Vuyo offered, pointing to Mandela's picture on his badge. "He is an African leader who went to jail for freedom."

After Mandela arrived, Vuyo and Themba would shake his hand as he moved down the official greeting line, taking the time to speak to each person. A little girl announced that she also shook his hand. As he gave a short speech, she shouted out, "Mommy, Mandela," pointing to the podium.

"I feel like an old battery that has been recharged," he told the crowd. In addition to courage, integrity, dedication and strength, Mandela possesses an infectious charm. "We admire you. We respect you. And above all, we love you."

As he left, he faced the crowd that was not part of the official line, walking toward us as if he were greeting old friends, as if he might give us a hug. Just before the extended hands touched his, a security agent guided him back toward the car and on to the rally.

The Coliseum was packed and the sun was hot. Throngs of people squeezed by each other as

they inched toward their seats and yet no one seemed to mind being bumped or pushed. For a few hours the incredibly mixed and diverse crowd of almost 60,000 was unified. Drawn by the power of the man and the singularity of his mission. In the hot sun they waited.

U.S. Congressman Ron Dellums, who introduced the sanctions bill in Congress long ago, was greeted with cheers. In a fiery introduction speech that recalled another time, he lauded the Bay Area's history of anti-apartheid activism. He said simply, "We made history."

Mandela took the podium and 60,000 people jumped to their feet and shouted, waving ribbons in the colors of the ANC flag. The floor of the Coliseum turned to a rippling yellow, black and green sea and a heat of excitement rose from the crowd. A woman in front of me sat silently and cried.

Mandela spoke about the continued injustices in South Africa, the inadequacy of the non-white schools, the inferior health care, the threat of white vigilantes. And he talked about the injus-

ties in the U.S. against the Native Americans. "Together we must rekindle the spirit of strength and unity," he said.

For those moments, for a half hour in the bright sun of a Saturday afternoon, Oakland looked like it could do anything, change anything, solve any problem. Mandela had come to thank the Bay Area for its support and urge its continued fight against apartheid. But he brought something much larger than thanks, he brought hope and resolve, the possibility of our own power and ability to take our destinies in hand.

And then it was over. Mandela finished his speech and we sang "Nkosi Sikeleli Africa," the ANC anthem.

People filed out of the Coliseum, preparing for the long, crowded walk out, looking back over their shoulders. Maybe he was going to come back on stage. Others remained at their seats.

No one was ready to break the spell of power that had electrified one Saturday afternoon in Oakland.